

Werthmann, Katja: *City Life in Africa. Anthropological Insights.*
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In her most recent book, German professor and urban anthropologist Katja Werthmann embarks on a comprehensive journey to illuminate anthropology's potential in understanding African urbanism. Not only does she trace the development of urban anthropology with reference to the African continent over the course of nearly a century, she also provides a rich overview of the multitude of existing empirical case studies. The declared aim of this book is to trace 'what anthropologists have come to know about African city dwellers' ideas and practices' (p. 16), making it a book about the history of the (sub)discipline, as well as the experience of African urbanites.

A distinctive feature of the book is its meticulous referencing of a wide range of literature, consolidating various perspectives under one roof. Werthmann undertakes the long overdue task of establishing and enriching the topical canon by highlighting contributions by African and female anthropologists that have previously been overlooked. The book serves as a remarkable repository, offering an unparalleled overview of a century of anthropological studies on urban spaces in Africa. Its breadth is impressive, drawing on works in English, French and German, while its empirical depth is substantiated by insightful primary source quotations, making it a useful resource for students, teachers and practitioners interested in urban space and its inhabitants in Africa.

The book's focus is on African city-dwellers' experiences, practices and notions, focusing on actions and behaviors rather than the built environment or structural factors. Each chapter employs a verbal gerund as a title (Moving, Connecting, Governing, Working, Dwelling, and Wayfinding), underscoring Werthmann's choice of viewing African cities as spaces where 'doing the city' takes precedence.

The book is structured into six chapters of 21–33 pages each, preceded by an introductory chapter and followed by a discussion chapter. The chapters are designed to stand alone, allowing readers to delve into them separately. Each chapter follows a similar structure: starting out with an introductory note elucidating the respective practice, Werthmann presents between three and seven 'insights' per chapter. These insights (statements or hypotheses about the experiences and practices of urbanites on the continent) are then substantiated by empirical material. A special feature of the book are the text-boxes strewn throughout the text, in which the author highlights and elaborates on persons or themes that are central to the (history of the) study of African urban spaces.

In some ways, reading the text resembles taking a stroll through some urban spaces on the African continent: the scenery is quite fragmented and challenging to navigate without zig-zagging, minding one's step and taking an occasional detour or leap to arrive at one's destination. Much like the informal settlements of African megacities, the most interesting structures and relevant landmarks are missing on the 'map': to ease the navigation, it could have helped to have more than just the abstract first-level headings in the table of contents. However, in being divided into short sections, the text

allows readers to jump to topics of interest or to discover interesting bits on the way, while an index offers the opportunity to explore specific themes or to find information on a particular city, author or topic.

The overall structure of the book is quite accessible. In the introduction, Werthmann sets the scene, discussing quite self-critically how present-day anthropologists doing fieldwork in the cities of the African continent are often unaware of the long and diverse research tradition they stand in, but even more oblivious of the historical depth of forms of social organization in urban Africa. She calls into question the preconceived notion that views the urban anthropology of Africa in the 1930s–1950s as synonymous with the Rhodes-Livingstone-Institute, pointing to research (often by female and/or African scholars) that went on before or in parallel to the RLI's studies, yet received much less attention. This latter point makes a much stronger argument than the unsurprising 'selling point' that follows, citing Africa's urbanization statistics to underscore the relevance of the publication.

The initial chapter, 'Moving', masterfully delves into the pivotal role of migration, particularly rural-to-urban migration, in the study of African urban life. Werthmann skillfully intertwines historical context with ethnographic case studies, painting a vivid picture of urban experiences, right down to the intricacies of cinema behavior in the Copperbelt during the 1950s, as observed by Hortense Powdermaker (p. 18). This chapter sets the tone for the book's deep and detailed empirical engagement.

The longest chapter, 'Connecting', explores various forms of relating as they happen in African cities, from marriages to ethnic bonds and neighborhood ties. While one sub-section of the chapter (Insight 4) touches on segregation – an essential aspect of post-colonial African urban life – it only receives more substantial attention in Chapter 6. Some insights sound quite common-sensical, e.g., 'Insight 1: Forms of coupling in African cities are extremely varied' (p. 44). However, the author is to be commended for the meticulous work she does in substantiating such broad claims by use of empirical materials from various regions of the continent.

In Chapter three, 'Governing', Werthmann delves into the political anthropology of African cities, examining the role of chiefs, elders and other informal authorities being the real power-holders in urban areas. In the latter half of the chapter, she looks at small and medium-sized towns as arenas in which national politics are played out. This being the shortest chapter, a reader looking for insights into the specifics of positioning oneself in a line of research in small or medium-sized urban centers is probably left wanting more. The call for more attention given to research in smaller towns is a critical point that Werthmann herself raises in her concluding remarks (p. 181).

Chapter Four, 'Working', investigates the intricacies of labor in the city, including how people find work and the organization of professional communities. Insight 3 in this chapter reads: 'Wage labourers do not necessarily constitute political interest groups' (p. 101), an example of a peculiarity found in several places in the book: Several insights are formulated in the negative while one can only speculate about what counter argument the author is writing 'against'. Here, Werthmann probably imagines a reader

trained in (Eurocentric) social sciences, assuming ‘class struggle’ works in the same way everywhere as it did in the particular history of Western Europe and the US. Other examples include: ‘Ethnicity does not matter in all social situations.’ (p. 53) and ‘Moving to the city does not mean leaving the countryside for good’ (p. 18). It would have been interesting to read more about the schools of thought that posit that ethnicity matters in all situations or that rural-urban migration be a one-way street.

Chapter Five, ‘Dwelling’, explores the built environment’s influence on African urban life, encompassing topics such as segregation policies and the impact of the state on urban structures. Unsurprisingly, the empirical case studies illustrating the insights about segregation are drawn from research in the Republic of South Africa – here, it would have been interesting to add examples from other regions. In fact, out of the 55 African countries, only about 20 are represented in the ethnographic material referenced in the book, with countries like Ethiopia, Sudan or Rwanda missing, whose particular histories could have added further representations of the diversity of experiences on the continent.

In the final chapter, ‘Wayfinding’, Werthmann presents ‘the concept of socio-spatial negotiation for exploring how city dwellers find their ways in the literal and figurative sense’ (p. 153), arriving once again at a question she explored in her 2014 article ‘Are cities in Africa ‘unknowable?’’ (in German). Insight 3 in this chapter focusses on Bobo-Dioulasso. It is a pleasure to read about Werthmann’s own research here, though linking the empirical descriptions of this particular place back to the central questions of the chapter could have strengthened the sub-chapter’s argument.

Certainly, each insight could warrant its own dedicated book, yet Werthmann does a tremendous job in concisely summarizing complex empirical studies in a few sentences and in ordering this vast and complex body of literature. In the book’s final chapter, ‘Discussion and Outlook’, the author ties the threads together, formulating questions and trends in the study of urban Africa since the 2000s. Quite a number of new aspects are introduced in this final chapter of the book, leaving the reader with ample opportunity to reflect.

Thanks to her nuanced exploration of these themes, backed by compelling case studies and insights, this book enriches the reader’s understanding of African urban realities. In conclusion, *The African City: Anthropological Insights* by Katja Werthmann is a monumental contribution, encapsulating a wealth of knowledge and diverse experiences pertaining to urban life in Africa. It serves as an invaluable resource for anyone keen on getting to know the multifaceted realm of anthropological studies on urban spaces and their inhabitants and on exploring lesser-known studies of crucial importance to the development of this sub-discipline. The book’s richness lies not only in its contents, but also in Werthmann’s unrivaled expertise, which is necessary to unearth them, making it a seminal work in the field of African urban anthropology.